

# Studio International

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# New York commentary

They say that subjects in sensory deprivation experiments occasionally become addicted to deprivation. Lying in a tank of warm water, gently rocked, it is quite possible to become indifferent to the chaos of existence, and, after a long period, become a thrall to the repetitive hallucinations such experience induces.

It remains to be seen how far such addiction will go in the literally dizzying events New York has seen this season. The latest is the MUSEUM OF MODERN ART's 'Spaces' exhibition in which five individual artists and one artists' collaborative have set up sensory experiments that could serve the scientific community as well as the artistic. In two 'spaces' at least, the conditions are ideal for neurophysiological experimentation.

Michael Asher has established an environment in which minimal light and sound stimuli place the subject in a condition of suspension. If he navigates the white obscurity slowly, he may well feel dizziness and perceptual disorientation. The thick carpeting and sound-proofed walls and ceiling make it impossible for the sensitive subject to respond, as he would normally, while moving through. In the abnormality of response he may well find a small adventure comparable to those reported by explorers stranded in Antarctica or at sea. Admiral Byrd who originally wanted to 'taste peace...quiet and solitude long enough to find out how good they really are' later felt a deep need for 'stimuli from the outside world...sounds, smells, voices, touch'.

<sup>1</sup>  
Eva Hesse *Contingent* 1969  
Fischbach Gallery, New York

<sup>2</sup>  
Michael Asher *Untitled* 1969  
8 ft high × 23 ft wide × 21 ft deep  
Acoustical board, speakers, noise generator.  
Photograph by Claude Picasso

The sense of isolation is perhaps even more stunning in Larry Bell's space, which for most viewers was more like a dark tunnel than a room. Although there were said to be panels of vacuum-coated glass in the room, I found only a long wall along which I groped my way to the end and back, knowing only the half-pleasant trepidation that spelunkers must know. This temporary disorientation for people who are visually active (or I should say, *more* visually active, since vision is indisputably the queen of the senses) has a mildly novel physiological effect. If one had never been immersed; were never in a dark tunnel; never underwater; or even, never in a funhouse, it would be an important experience.

Asher's room was white while Bell's was black, and both had almost—but not quite—eliminated sensory stimuli. Both produced an effect which is often considered a part of the so-called aesthetic experience: the surprise of perceptual disorientation. The surprise affects individuals differently, I suppose, but probably everyone experiences some sensation of spatial infinity; some boundless oceanic sensation which Jung ascribed to certain kinds of art. These two environmentalists, then, are really verifying certain basic assumptions about the way we perceive depth, or space. But they have, in their scientific way, withheld commentary (I mean visual commentary). Quite a while ago, Claude Bernard established that 'la fixité du milieu intérieur est la condition de la vie libre'—the stability of the interior milieu is the condition of free activity. That stability in the human organism is the result of a marvellously organized system into which pour countless stimuli. The free activity of the human organism, including the imagination, is dependent on the variety of stimuli it receives and governs. Similarly, I would think that the work of art is dependent on the variety of stimuli it can induce, and its sensitivity to the thresholds of experience. Asher's and Bell's rooms have nothing to do with art, but only with one possible effect of

the aesthetic experience. By cutting drastically into the wholeness of human experience and isolating one facet, they contribute to the general problem of addiction, instability and passiveness. All the clichés about alienated man seem to have been lodged in the minds of those we now call artists. The freedom of action suggested as the perfect human order by Claude Bernard is forcibly reduced in these and countless other experiments we have had the mild pleasure of experiencing in the name of art.

The complexity of the Pulsa group's offering puts it into another category. Years ago Billy Kluver used to ground his argument for art married to technology on the appealing example of Chinese fireworks. They were technological, ephemeral and artistic, and gave visual pleasure. The Pulsa group's garden arrangement, with blinking lights, agreeable whooshing sounds, and oases of artificial heat, meet all these requirements. The complicated programmed events are governed by sounds and movements in the garden itself, as well as changes in weather. If one were not interested in the vast concatenation of knowledge that can produce such programmes, one could still be enchanted by the flares of random light and the irregular rhythm of sounds. The merit of Pulsa's performance is in its liveliness, its variety of volatile stimuli, which under certain circumstances could be called similar to the stimuli produced by theatrical performances such as the ballet.

I can't say the same for Robert Morris's expensive but silly room—an artificially-cooled, moisturized greenhouse in which steel alleys conduct the viewer through miniature mountains of baby spruce trees, with the avowed intention of playing with space experience and perspective, but finally just seeming like an extravagance of the kind of mind that likes to contemplate dioramas and other World's Fair spectacles. The slight surrealism in Morris's thought cannot redeem the basically literalist effect. I'm sure I'm not the only one whose thoughts turned to the





huge sums of money these undertakings require, somewhat ruefully.

Much more modest, since it consists of photographs, is the exhibition of Michael Heizer's great adventure in the American mythologyland out West. We follow our artist-pioneer in slides and photographs as he supervises the digging of a deepcut trench on the top of an isolated plateau out there where there is nobody, but lots of nature. The trench running through the top of a low mountain photographs well, looks a little like some ancient ruin, Mayan or even Mycenaean, and really gives you that sense of isolation you all crave. The city dwellers at the DWAN GALLERY no doubt catch their breaths to see the natural vastness sullied by one puny man. It would be better to be the man, of course. Who could remain unmoved by the magnificence of the landscape? In fact you *could* be the man if you had the money, since this mountain was bought by the acre, and the work of art it becomes has a price. Well, I have a weakness for people who want to make mountainous sculptures, and I like the grandiose gesture, and I'm glad it's not a miniature didactic space in the Museum of Modern Art.

Spaces manipulated on various scales are also an inherent part of the latest exhibition at FINCH COLLEGE in the series called 'Art in Process'. Although I find the premise decidedly flimsy, and often contradicted in the exhibits, the Finch College series is almost always interesting. The premise seems to be that there is something called conceptual art and that conceptual artists are interested mostly in something they call ideas, and that occasionally they can be persuaded to try to enact their ideas, but that if they do, it is only because they enjoy the process of enactment, and the results are not important.

The coyness of this approach is distasteful. Just as when one reads the intimate journals of certain writers, one knows they were meant to be far from intimate, and on the contrary, as widely broadcast as possible, so one knows that the sketchy wall labels and notes of certain conceptualists are the studied effect of an attitude. Attitudinizing is all too often the sum total of this genre.

For all that, there are certain exhibits in this show that I found more than conceptual in its current sense. Or should I say less than? When Eva Hesse hangs eight sections of rubberized cheesecloth and fibreglass from the ceiling, and when those delicate surfaces and transparencies have an enormous range of beautiful light and shadow, the concept is the last thing I think of. What she does is work with materials in the creative way painters and sculptors have of working with materials, and it is because she produces works, not ideas, that Hesse stands out. The same is true of Richard Van Buren whose wall of irregularly shaped, transparent fibreglass forms is filled with vivid reflections, glancing surfaces,

sensations of movement and downright beauty. His own commentary (you just see gravity...it's so clear you can dismiss it) suits the wall, and seems to me to have little pretension of conceptualism.

The idea of process is more apposite in Robert Morris's project in which he set up a revolving camera to photograph photographs and their reflections in mirrors, and then, as the finale, sets up a revolving projector which projects the filmings of the photographs and their mirror images on the very walls which once held them. The multiple steps Morris undertook to produce the final performance being documented in the performance itself qualify as process, and are, in fact, very stimulating. There is nothing so intriguing as mirror images and moving pictures. Morris leaves plenty of space for the imagination of the viewer.

No thought exists without a sustaining support, notes Mel Bochner in one of those wall label sketchbooks of ideas, or half-ideas. Whatever his thought may have been when he constructed *Measurement: Group C*, it is not the thought but the very startling combination of different kinds of experiences that strikes me. (I just looked it up in the catalogue, Bochner explains that Group C is comparative, and is 'any stable object, materials, or place related to a pre-determined standard'.)

The sustaining support in this case is a crisp black measuring line (black tape, I think), on the white wall, telling us it is '108"' and a huge potted plant plunked in front of it. The wall reflects the rich foliage in lovely shadows, while the black lineament tricks us into illusion. Green growing and picture frames and light and shadow and organic versus inorganic and real space and no space and illusory space and measurement versus infinity—Bochner's paradoxes are stimulating, and they look good, too. His thoughts as such are only as good as the cues he supplies to them, and the cues are almost enough to survive without the thoughts dangling after them.

The thoughts in SIDNEY JANIS's 'String' show are all about string. This is an anthology—and a very good one—of the role of string in modern art, ranging from a photograph of Marcel Duchamp's famous installation of I don't know how many miles of string in the 1941 Surrealist exhibition in New York, to more recent rope tricks on large scale. The old masters are legion (Schwitters, Arp, Picasso, Miró) who found the modest piece of string an inspiration. The young masters are more interested in rope, which can be made to trail from one room to another, or be dealt with on the seaman's level, knotted into nice ladder patterns. This is a show that hangs by a thread or a rope, as do so many shows these days, but one that has untold pleasures in its long list of inventive personages. There are more Frank Stella paintings to be

seen (his production is staggering) at the LAWRENCE RUBIN GALLERY. These are prodigies of composition—the tensest, most complicated and forceful paintings he has ever done. No one can make a taut, complex composition as firmly as Stella using only geometric forms and their left-overs, and intense deep-dyed colour. Ranging from the bizarre to the classically equilibrated form, Stella manages to keep what are essentially staccato rhythms in a kind of perpetual flow through his compositions. Old Hans Hofmann with his simple formula of push-and-pull would have been gratified to see how much pushing and pulling Stella can do with fairly limited means. The aestheticians used to talk about pure visibility, which I never quite understood. But Stella's paintings somehow seem to illustrate the concept.

At LEO CASTELLI there are many Jasper Johns drawings covering a period of years. They are good to see. Johns has an undeniable penchant for the range of values possible on paper and the best of his works have always reflected his sensitivity to the minor shifts in light and value. This review of a large area of Johns' creative life is of great value. One wishes galleries would be more inclined to show drawings as works of art.

The great expenditure a show such as 'Spaces' represents (the supplies were all donated by interested businesses) would not seem so painful if the Museum were holding up its end of the struggle to keep the fine arts in the realm of human experience at its highest and most ethical. Once again it has shown the stranglehold nature of trustee overseeing in refusing to go ahead with a poster scheme proposed by the Art Workers' Coalition. Apparently at one point the Museum had agreed to co-sponsor and distribute a poster against the war in Vietnam. The poster, according to Art Workers involved, was agreed upon. Even the photograph of atrocities was accepted, it seems. The final poster showing the pathetic heap of women and children with only a few words of text (Above: 'Q. And babies too?' and below: 'A. And babies too.') was subsequently rejected. Most probably, it was rejected by trustees and not by museum staff. I hope so anyway. But it was rejected. When the range of business interests and investments of those trustees is examined, it is hard to assume that they intervened for reasons of public trust. There are plenty of good arguments for their co-sponsoring this poster, not the least of which is the will of the artists on whom they depend, and whose existence permits such things as trustees in the first place. No matter how you look at it, artists are entitled to try to make their uneasy relationship with the wealthy a bit more palatable, and this would have been a good beginning. The Museum in its pretence that it is objective and must not meddle in public affairs is only paving the way for its possible destruction.

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